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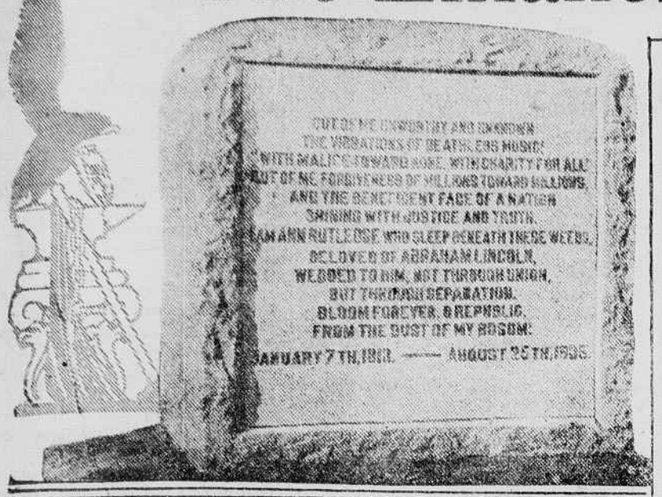
Memorial Raised to Ann Rutledge, Lincoln's Early Love; The Emancipator Never Forgot His First Sweetheart



REID

A FEW weeks ago this stone, bearing Edgar Lee Masters's poem as an inscription, was placed above the grave of Ann Rutledge

By Torrey Ford

ON AUGUST 25, 1835, a slim little girl, just twenty-three years old and filled with the joy of living, died at a lonely farmhouse near Salem, Ill. Her name was Ann Rutledge.

A tall, gaunt man stood by her bedside, dry-eyed. Up to the very last he held one of her soft, fevered hands between his own hard, calloused palms. He didn't speak to her; she couldn't have heard him. But he prayed to God fervently.

When it was all over he passed out of the room, stricken with a great grief. Out into the fields he went and into the deep woods. He wanted to get away from the world. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

His First Sweetheart

Ann and Abraham were engaged to be married. She loved him and he loved her. She was his first sweetheart. She was everything in the world to him. Yet she died and left him alone. And Abraham mourned in solitude.

From the depths of his gloom Lincoln came back and achieved greatness. He had other affairs of the heart—eventually he married; but there are those who maintain that he loved only once. Toward the end of his life a friend asked him about Ann Rutledge.

"I have never forgotten her," he said.

They buried Ann Rutledge on the mossy bank of the Sangamon. An unpolished bowlder was lifted from the stream and placed in position as a headstone. In the crude fashion of the day a feeble attempt was made at a fitting epitaph. It resulted in the plain words:

ANN RUTLEDGE

For the space of eighty-five years that was all that appeared on her grave to chronicle the birth, the life and the death of a maiden whose influence and name will never fade from the annals of history. In contrast with this solitary grave and the simple bowlder headstone, one may view the monumental shaft in Oak Ridge, at Springfield, Ill., and a national memorial at Washington.

A Monument at Last

Last month, at the suggestion of the Hon. Henry B. Rankin, of Springfield, a group of Menard County people, descendants of the pioneer families who lived in the vicinity of New Salem at the time of the historical love romance, provided funds for the creation of a suitable monument to mark the grave of Lincoln's first sweetheart.

A massive stone of dark Quincy granite was placed at the head of the grave. As a footstone it seemed entirely fitting to use the ancient rough hewn bowlder that has served for so many years. On the face of the granite the following verse from Edgar Lee Masters's "Ann Rutledge" is inscribed:

"Out of me, unworthy and unknown,
The vibrations of deathless music,
With malice toward none, with charity for all,
Out of me, forgiveness of millions toward millions,
And the beneficent face of a nation
Shining with justice and truth.
I am Ann Rutledge, who sleeps beneath these weeds,
Beloved of Abraham Lincoln,
Wedded to him, not through union
But through separation.
Bloom forever, O republic,
From the dust of my bosom."

And so is some retribution made for the neglect of a century.

Was Afraid of Girls

When Lincoln first came to New Salem he was girl shy. In the backwoods of Indiana, where he had grown to manhood, they didn't serve afternoon tea. They didn't even have a midwinter assembly. They weren't that kind of folks. Of course, New Salem was no metropolis, but it had its ladies. Presumably there were debs, sub-debs and well meaning spinsters fighting to keep young. In his capacity as a merchant of the town Lincoln could not avoid an occasional encounter with some of these ladies.

But he had no palate for it. He was too tall, for one thing, and too bony. His clothes fitted him only at the corners. He could tell by the way the ladies looked at him that something was wrong. So he avoided them.

Still, he cultivated the courteous phrase and the bow tie. He wanted to be ready when the time came.

There was one girl that attracted him particularly. She had blue eyes and a winsome smile. She was pretty, too, in a rural sort of way. But she came from Kentucky and expected more of a man than Lincoln felt he could give. This was nineteen-year-old Ann Rutledge.

Worshiped From Afar

Lincoln sat back and admired Ann from a distance. She may have stirred his heart to great emotions, but he kept silent. She was the belle of the town. She frightened him, especially when she smiled in his direction. Even when he boarded at her father's cabin he couldn't get accustomed to being near such a pretty girl.

John McNeil, a handsome young chap from the East, wooed Ann and won her without opposition from the tall backwoodsman. In fact, Lincoln had never been written down as an official rival. He was just in the gallery, an interested and rather crestfallen spectator. Ann was too good for him, anyway.

Shortly after the engagement was announced and the congratulations all recorded McNeil left town. He was returning to the East, he said, and would be back later for the wedding. He promised to write often.

In a village the size of New Salem these details were common property. So, too, every one knew when McNeil failed to write his fiancée. As postmaster Lincoln did his best, but he couldn't produce any letters. Months went by and Ann grew unhappy. At last she told some of her friends that "McNeil" was only a pseudonym assumed by her lover. His real name was McNamar. But she still believed in him.

Lincoln's Devotion Rewarded

Lincoln waited a little longer. He was too conscientious to push his suit while there was any doubt of McNamar's intentions. But he stayed close to Ann and helped her over the hard places. Gradually Ann transferred her affections from the departed McNamar to the present Abraham.

It was in the spring of 1835 that Ann confessed to Arminda Rogers that she intended to marry Abraham Lincoln. But there was to be a long engagement. Ann was preparing to enter an academy for young ladies at Jacksonville, Ill., while Lincoln was still studying for his career as a lawyer. They weren't to be married until Lincoln established himself as something more than a country town storekeeper.

During the summer of 1835 an epidemic of malarial diseases hit central Illinois. The Rutledge family was listed among the sufferers. Little Ann, never very robust, nursed several of her brothers and sisters before she fell a victim to the contagion.

Lincoln biographers and plain fiction writers have given considerable space to the story of Ann Rutledge's tragic death. They have painted a highly sensational picture of a maiden dying from a broken heart, or a heart torn between two great emotions, the new love for Lincoln and the old passion for McNamar.

Not a Broken Heart

According to Henry B. Rankin, whose mother was Arminda Rogers, there is "need of no fancy or imagery to put color in the environment within or without the life of Abraham Lincoln or Ann Rutledge while the story of the days leading up through August to its fateful 25th is told."

Ann died because she wasn't strong enough to combat the disease. Her life and love were plighted to Lincoln at the time. If she had any thoughts for McNamar no one of her intimate circle of family and friends shared her emotions. She was Lincoln's sweetheart to the last.

To Lincoln Ann's death brought the most depressing period of his life. After days of wandering aimlessly about, Dr. John Allen persuaded him to go to the Bowling Green home. There, under the ministering care of motherly Mrs. Greene, he found refuge from the tormenting storms that hovered about him. In less than a month—in three weeks—Lincoln was back in Salem. He was ready to meet life again.

The Kentucky Maiden

Several months passed by before Lincoln again ventured on an affair that bordered on the romantic. And, in defense of the ultimate outcome, it may be said that Lincoln was only a passive participant. He was—as all of his friends insist upon testifying—the victim of an unhappy circumstance.

Mrs. Bennet Able, a buxom young matron of Salem, had a sister down in Kentucky. Mrs. Able described this Mary Owens in glowing terms. Lincoln thought he had met her years before. As he remembered her vaguely, she had many attractions. Mrs. Able talked about inviting her up for a visit.

"If you'll ask Mary to marry you I will," she told Abraham.

And no young man who possessed an ounce of chivalry could have replied anything but:

"Sure. Bring her on."

When Mary Owens arrived she hardly lived up to anticipations. She was too hefty to be considered seriously as a matrimonial asset. Besides, she brushed her hair straight back and was minus several front teeth. The combination worked inversely on the enthusiasm of a prospective suitor.

Lincoln took one look and began to think up excuses for a hasty withdrawal from the campaign. But the ladies had outguessed him. They gave him to understand that he had as good as signed the papers when he permitted Mary Owens to be invited to Salem. They told him he was "engaged" by all the laws of the land. And so he became "engaged."

To most men the situation might not have presented any difficulties; but with Lincoln there was nothing in his code of conduct to cover the case. For a long time he was in a quandary. Finally he took a bold step. From Springfield he wrote Mary Owens:

"I am often thinking of what we said about your coming to live at Springfield. I am afraid you would not be satisfied. There is a great deal of flourishing about in carriages here, which it would be your doom to see without sharing in it. You would have to be poor without the means of hiding your poverty. Do you believe you could bear that patiently?

"What you have said to me may have been in the way of jest, or I may have misunderstood it. If so, then let it be forgotten; if otherwise, I must wish you would think seriously before you decide. What I have said I will most positively abide by, provided you wish it. My opinion is that you had better not do it. You have not been accustomed to hardship, and it may be more severe than you now imagine. I know you are capable of thinking correctly on any subject, and if you deliberate maturely upon this before you decide, then I am willing to abide your decision."

Miss Owens reacted to this ardent "wooing" in a manner that must have disconcerted Lincoln. He found it necessary to address her again.

Lincoln Eager to Quit

"You must know," he wrote, "that I cannot see you or think of you with entire indifference. I want in all cases to do right, and most particularly so in all cases with women. I want at this particular time, more than anything else, to do right with you, and if I knew it would be doing right, as I rather suspect it would, to let you alone, I would do it. And for the purpose of making the matter as plain as possible I now say that you can drop the subject and dismiss your thoughts from me forever without calling forth one accusing murmur from me.

"Do not understand by this that I wish to cut your acquaintance. What I do wish is that our further acquaintance shall depend upon yourself.

"If such further acquaintance would contribute nothing to your happiness I am sure it would not to mine. If you feel yourself in any degree bound to me I am now willing to release you, provided you wish it; while, on the other hand, I am willing and even anxious to bind you faster, if I could be convinced that it will in any considerable degree add to your happiness. This, indeed, is the whole question with me. Nothing would make me more miserable than to believe you miserable—nothing more happy than to know you were so."

Blamed Only Himself

Apparently this last letter served its intent. Miss Owens gave out to her friends that she had found Lincoln "deficient in those little links which make up the chain of a woman's happiness." Soon afterward she married a Southerner. Her treatment of the affair shook Lincoln's faith in woman.

"Others have been made fools of by the girls," he remarked to a friend, "but this can never with truth be said of me. I most emphatically in this instance made a fool of myself. I have now come to the conclusion never again to think of marrying, and for this reason I can never be satisfied with any one who would be blockhead enough to have me."

Just a year later he became engaged to Mary Todd.

Miss Todd was from Lexington, Ky., the daughter of a prosperous banker. She came to Springfield to live with her married sister, Mrs. Ninian Edward, a leading figure in the social whirl of the town. Miss Todd plunged into society with all the eagerness of a débutante, and by some chance met Lincoln.

Mary Todd's Foresight

Mary Todd was ambitious; she wanted to become a President's wife. Whether she was gifted with second sight or a little bird had whispered in her ear has never been determined. At all events, she selected Lincoln from among a score or so of more promising eligibles. Her friends and relatives could never understand her choice. At the time Mary Todd was far above Lincoln both socially and financially. They couldn't see why she didn't take Senator Stephen A. Douglas. She explained her preference briefly.

"Few people seem to realize," she said, "that his heart is as large as his arms are long."

The generally accepted story is that Lincoln proposed to Mary Todd in a burst of enthusiasm. Later his ardor cooled and he fell into a great fit of depression. He wrote a letter to Mary, telling her that he was afraid he had "made a mistake." But he didn't send the letter. He read it to his friend, Joshua Speed. Speed advised that such things should be spoken and not written.

Tried to Break Engagement

So Lincoln went to Mary. She heard his confession through and then made her appeal. She held out her arms to Lincoln.

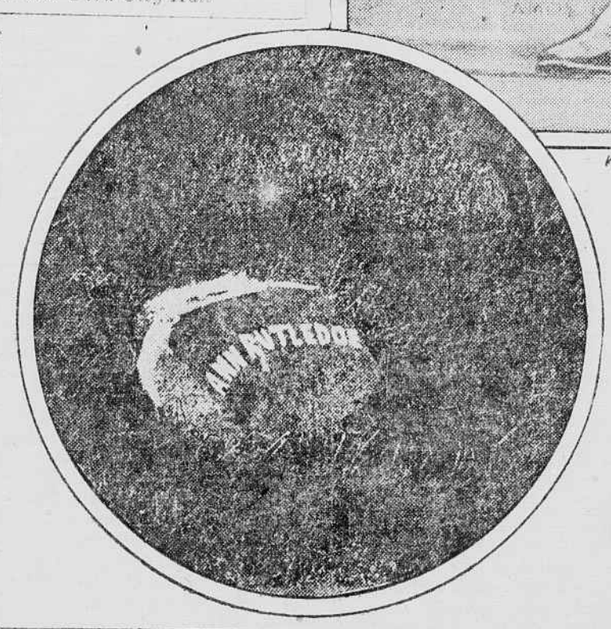
"The tears were running down my own cheeks," he told Speed afterward. "I caught her in my arms and kissed her."

When the day for the wedding was finally set Lincoln began to brood again. His forebodings of a terrible future tormented him day and night. Speed tried to reassure him, but he was beyond all human aid. On the "fatal January 1, 1840," he broke his engagement with Mary Todd. He said he did it to regain his self-respect and power of decision.

Rankin speaks of it as a "deferred engagement," while other biographers, mainly Herndon, paint a vivid picture of a wedding without a bridegroom, of a gallery of waiting guests, a wedding cake and a forlorn bride. The bulk of evidence seems to prove that there was no bride left waiting at the church. Lincoln gave her plenty of time to remove the bridal veil before the first strains of the wedding march. The best explanation of his conduct

(Continued on page three)

THIS life-size standing oil portrait of Abraham Lincoln was painted from life in the fall of 1864 and the spring of 1865 by George W. F. Travis, of Frankfort-on-the-Main, and is declared to be the only full-length oil painting ever made of Lincoln from the life. Mr. Travis came to America to enlist in the Union Army, but, being rejected because of his health, he remained in Washington and persuaded Mr. Lincoln to sit for him. It was exhibited at the Centennial Exposition, and Mrs. Lincoln, seeing it there, was so overcome that she fainted. A committee consisting of Senators Voorhees, Evarts and Hoar recommended its purchase by the government, but the bill failed of passage in the closing days of the session. The painting is now on view at the rooms of the Ohio Society at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, and its present owner, G. Prince, is desirous of seeing it hung in the Governor's Room at the New York City Hall



FOR years this small stone was the only mark placed above the grave of Ann Rutledge

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THE new Lincoln Memorial in Washington

AT THE right is a picture of Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of Abraham Lincoln. It was her girlhood ambition to be a President's wife

WIDE WORLD PHOTO

THE Borglum statue of Lincoln at Newark, N.J. It is a favorite playground for the children of the neighborhood